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ABSTRACT

A "generative stylistics" approach to writing presents usable, conscious standards for the production, arrangement, and rearrangement of written discourse thereby teaching students how to make appropriate decisions about language usage. Based on research studies that indicate the dependence of the writing process on the decision making process in areas such as coherence, order, and intended audience, this approach could affect student motivation positively because it implies an explicit statement of the tasks to be accomplished and presents standards for determining success. While areas of linguistics (tagmemics and transformational grammar) and composition theory contribute to the understanding of the writing process, they do not offer workable criteria for making decisions and cannot be used in establishing a comprehensive generative stylistics. After research has defined how forms and patterns of language affect the reader and how the reader responds to elements of varying relevance, a fixed set of standards can be established that offers fixed patterns of expected and unexpected arrangement in written discourse which will elicit predictable audience responses. These standards would also provide focusing techniques for measuring writing and guiding revision. (HAI)

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WRITING AS A DECISION PROCESS

Robert de Beaugrande

To many students of today, a writing course seems to be "the one situation in college in which you are going to be taught something that you seem to need to know all about before you can learn anything" (S. Miller 1976:1). This is because teachers and instruction designers have yet to provide an explicit and complete account of the skills that must be mastered in order to write successfully. In the meantime, we continue to presuppose and reward abilities which we cannot directly create or influence with the methods of traditional instruction.

Confronted by a population of students who, for various reasons (such as mass media passivization and the decline of reading as a pastime among young people), have not even developed a provisional level of writing skills, the theory and methodology of composition have moved their focus away from the product, the text, toward the process of writing (cf. the pioneering study by Emig 1971). We are becoming aware of the relationship between the complexity and variability of language on the one hand, and the vast differences in personal language experience and abilities on the other. An experienced and successful user of language must command a set of strategies for selecting, from among the options of the entire language, those which are suitable for a given context and audience. I shall therefore argue that writing instruction should consist of presenting and applying usable criteria for making appropriate decisions about language use with respect to the production and formation of texts (cf. Milic 1965). Following the view of many researchers (Ohmann 1959, Milic 1971, Spillner 1974) that style is the manifestation and result of the choices made by the speaker/writer, I shall designate such an approach as "generative stylistics" (Beaugrande 1977a).

People who speak or write must make a vast number of interconnected decisions.

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The decisions of speakers are in many ways less final, because the situation of speech interaction allows considerable room for emendation, reconsideration, and restatement. Possible misunderstandings can be averted with the use of facial expression and gestures, and the hearers can always interpose and demand clarification. The decisions of writers are open to no such recourse. It follows that a writing program must strive to move the decision-making process from the realm of intuition and chance to a level where the criteria for deciding are conscious, explicit, and efficient. This will slow down the actual production of texts considerably in the early phases of training, but it will greatly reduce the vague and fortuitous aspects of success in writing. My experiments suggest that an explicit statement of the tasks to be accomplished and the standards for determining success has a strong positive effect on student motivation.

All phases of the writing process depend on decision making. Even the act of perceiving the human environment involves complex decisions about what is important and how perception should be arranged and interpreted (Young/Becker/Pike 1970). Richard Ohmann (1959) speaks of "epistemic choice" as "a writer's method of dissecting the universe as expressed by the infinite number of choices he [or she] makes." Frank D'Angelo (1975) asserts that patterns of thinking more or less directly determine the planning and organizing of discourse. Richard L. Larson (1971a, 1971b) views "movements of mind" as manifested in the arrangement of essays. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that thoughts are organized in precisely the same ways as discourse. While discourse is linear and represents only one version of what is being communicated, thoughts are more likely hierarchic and represent a complex interweaving of possible alternatives regarding what is to be communicated. Therefore the transition from the mental to the written medium involves at least the reduction of multivalence and communicational alternatives as well as an

arrangement of non-linearly stored elements in a linear mode. Viewed from this angle, the immense margin for chaos and error in writing becomes evident. This margin can be reduced to manageable proportions either by lengthy experience in the production and rearrangement of texts, or by referring to a set of conscious standards for producing, arranging, and re-arranging texts.

On the other hand, there are powerful factors which work to impose coherence and order upon discourse. Kenneth Pike (1964) points out that the human mind seems unable to function without some universal invariant principles of organization. The material stored in the mind and used as a base for discourse must therefore be pre-sorted to some extent. In addition, the decisions made early in the writing process drastically reduce the alternatives to be considered later on. A writer must decide at once what the prospective reader audience will be, and consider the presuppositions, beliefs, and attitudes of that audience (cf. in particular Pearsall 1969, and Young/Becker/Pike 1970, ch. 8-12). As soon as this aspect is clarified, many decisions regarding alternatives of selection and arrangement will be greatly simplified. For example, the previous knowledge held by the intended audience determines the density of information in the text, that is, the rate at which new information can be introduced and the amount of background that must accompany the latter (cf. Beaugrande 1978a). Also, the audience expectations serve to decide the degree of ordinariness that a text and its component elements should maintain. If a writer selects ordinary elements, notably lexical ones, an academic audience will find the text dull and pedestrian, while highly non-ordinary elements will annoy or even offend an audience that does not employ such elements in writing. It follows that a writer must fulfill at least some expectations of any audience, but must also deviate somewhat from those expectations if anything new or interesting is to be communicated. The ratio between fulfillment and non-fulfillment of expectations must be established

with respect to the intended audience and its interpreting strategies. As I have shown in detail elsewhere (Beaugrande 1977b), the qualities of non-ordinariness and non-expectedness do not always coincide; for example, poetic language is characterized by many non-ordinary aspects of language use which are nonetheless expected within the context of poetry, such as rime, displaced syntax, and archaic words.

All this suggests that successful writing is impossible unless the would-be writer first becomes a sufficiently skillful reader to be able to estimate the effect of his or her own texts on a prospective audience. It follows that the decision-making criteria I have advocated for presentation must be overtly observable in samples of good writing, such that any close reading — and I would see the relevance of <u>literature</u> for the modern student in this very factor — becomes a process of conscious training in the control and use of language.

I should like to survey the realm of linguistic research (see also Beaugrande 1978b), to see what can be used in setting up the criteria whose function I have outlined above. In structural linguistics, the notion of the "paradigmatic" aspect of language served to specify what the linguistically possible alternatives were for a given "slot" in discourse. Tagmemics widened the scope to include not only language elements, but other types of communication and behavior as capable of occupying slots in discourse. However, structural linguistics had little to say about the actual criteria for deciding what would be selected to fill a slot, relegating such considerations to the level of "parole", that is, the variables of language use not deemed fit for scientific description. The tagmeme, on the other hand, is itself a combination of a given slot and the class of elements capable of occupying the slot, plus — if I understand the theory correctly — at least some criteria for determining what should be chosen.

Tagmemists have accordingly provided the most detailed and comprehensive account of the factors influencing language decisions within the framework of structural linguistics, as far as I knew (Young/Becker/Pike 1970). However, the structural notion of the slot seems problematic, since it appears to presuppose a framework of arrangement rather than to explain how such a framework evolves in the first place. In other words, I do not see quite how the notion of the slot is compatible with an unbiased account of how form evolves directly out of communicational content.

Nils-Erik Enkvist (1971), following Richard Ohmann (1964), views transformational grammar as the most complete model for linguistic choice. Yet transformational grammar can only account for what John C. Mellon (1969) describes as "syntactic fluency," particularly in the area of "sentence-combining." Since it is predicated on the idea that syntax is autonomous of other language factors (even in Chomsky's recent work, cf. Searle 1976), transformational grammar is intrinsically unfit to provide workable criteria for deciding on one syntactic pattern as opposed to another. It is surely too simple to assume that syntactic complexity is identical with high quality or maturity in writing, since that would lose sight of the various types of reader audience.

We can therefore conclude that the mainstream of American linguistics can be used to state at least some formal alternatives, but not to derive workable criteria for making decisions about these alternatives. A statement of alternatives is nonetheless important. Mina Shaughnessy (1976:139) points out that culturally disadvantaged students are "restricted as writers [...] to a very narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options."

Unfortunately, the situation in composition theory is not much better. Richard L. Larson (1976:71) sums it up as follows:

> We have, in studies of form, largely a record of search for formulas and patterns in discourse, and a record of advice on the properties that well-ordered discourse ought, in the a priori judgement of theorists, to exhibit. But the reasons for the effectiveness of different patterns, the ways in which their parts interact,

> the most useful techniques of deciding upon particular sequences of steps in composing — in short, many of the fundamental topics one has to address in choosing a form for a composition — have been dealt with slightly, hesitantly or not at all.

Here again, lack of workable criteria for making decisions constitutes the weak point for establishing a comprehensive generative stylistics.

One major weakness has arisen from the fact that many researchers have postulated these "formulas and patterns " mentioned by Larson on the basis of purely formal analysis of writing samples without an underlying communication-oriented theory. Thus the data generated has been ad hoc and has not really explained how form evolves out of the desire to communicate content, especially with respect to small scale aspects of grammar and syntax. Francis Christensen (1967:6) even reverses priorities by suggesting that "the mere form of the sentence generates ideas."

There are various ways of relating form to content, as a long-standing dispute among people throughout the Humanities attests. But a special viewpoint is clearly demanded for the approach I am advocating. If the limitations of formal studies in the past are to be overcome, we must investigate how forms and patterns of language function in communication, that is, how they affect readers. Each text contains some elements that the prospective readers probably know and others which are less familiar or totally new to them. When a decision about the concrete forms of a text must be made, the writer can hardly go wrong by considering which arrangement guides the reader toward the new or important information in the most efficient way. For example, the chief information in the typical English sentence appears in the verb or verb complement rather than in the subject (for an accessible account, see Chafe 1970), especially in writing. This arrangement corresponds to the need to state the topic or theme of the sentence before making some new point about it. It has been suggested (Firbas 1971) that language elements possess in their respective contexts various degrees of

"communicative dynamism" according to the relevance of the elements to the act of communication in progress. If it could be determined through further research and experimentation how readers respond to elements of varying relevance, the resulting insights would directly yield informative criteria for writers. This approach would not mean that fixed patterns would be established for writers to follow, but rather that writers would be aware of whether they are using expected or non-expected arrangements with regard to a given audience. In this fashion, such pressing issues as the extent to which the audience will tolerate non-expectedness without becoming confused or irritated can be set in a meaningful relationship to the writer's decisions about arrangement at all levels. A set of focusing techniques can be developed against which the writer measures what is being produced, both during the process of writing and later with a eye to revising. I would hope that continued use of focusing techniques in revising would lead to the formation of new writing habits and that the need for revision would dwindle. But the criteria underlying the stratgies would be sufficiently complex that it might be unmanageable to bear them all in mind at once. For example, a writer who has selected a topic and a prospective audience may well want to try several alternatives for arranging the topic elements: whether it is more effective to state a hypothesis and then defend it or to build up gradual arguments and present the hypothesis at the end would depend on the extent to which the hypothesis can be made acceptible to the readers in the one way or the other. Also, a writer who is attending to a large-scale consideration such as this might lose track of smaller factors, such as sentence formation. Once the text is all present in a draft, the decisions made in its production can be reconsidered in a more informed perspective, since small-scale decisions can be directed by the overall intended function of the text in communication. Special reader attention can be aroused by arranging a stretch

of text in which significant information is stated in a non-expected form. Also, possible misunderstandings can be effectively prevented. I would stress in this connection the value of miscue analysis such as reported by Allen and Watson (1976).

Unfortunately, I am limited here to merely suggesting what direction research for the development of generative stylistics should take. Investigation of how texts actually effect readers is only in its beginnings, especially with regard to grammatical/syntactic formation. In another study (Beaugrande 1977b), I have tried to show at length what sort of reader is presupposed by a highly non-ordinary and non-expected poetic discourse. Norbert Groeben (1975) and Wolfram Mauser et al. (1972) have conducted empiric experiments with lyric poetry. Like Janet Emig's (1971) study of the composition process of young people, these investigations suggest that many of our traditionally accepted views about what actually occurs in language use must be reconsidered. But in contrast to many studies in the past, the research about language within the actual context of human interaction has very good prospects of leading to valid and workable solutions of the most pressing problem facing the educational system today, that of teaching people to write their native language effectively.

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